

Willem van Aelst

1626–1683

VAN AELST was a pupil of his uncle, Evert van Aelst (1602–1658), a still-life painter in Delft. His father held the respected position of *Notaris* in Delft; hence, it is likely that Van Aelst came from a wealthy family. He joined the town's Saint Luke's Guild on 9 November 1643. Swillens has determined that Van Aelst was a Catholic; otherwise little information is known about his personal life. From 1645 until 1649 he lived in France and subsequently in Italy until 1656. While in Florence, Van Aelst worked as an assistant to the Dutch still-life painter Otto Marseus van Schrieck (1619/1620–1678) when that artist was employed by the Grand Duke of Tuscany, Ferdinand II de Medici. Van Aelst eventually received a gold medal and gold chain for his service. In 1656 he and Van Schrieck returned to the north. After a short period of time in Delft, Van Aelst moved to Amsterdam, where he remained for the rest of his life. At his death he left a wife and three children.

In 1672 Van Aelst was one of seven Dutch painters, including Van Schrieck, who were asked to judge the merits of a collection of Italian paintings sold to the great elector of Brandenburg by the Amsterdam art dealer Gerrit Uylenburgh. They declared the paintings worthless.¹ The flower painter Rachel Ruysch (1664–1750) was a student of Van Aelst's, and he influenced a number of other artists, including W. G. Ferguson (1632/1633–after 1695), Elias van den Broeck (c. 1650–1708), and Simon Verelst (1644–1721).

Van Aelst specialized in still-life painting, but within this genre he was quite versatile, painting fruit and flower pieces, and, above all, hunting scenes, with dead game and hunting gear. This type of picture became very popular after mid-century. Van Aelst seems to have been particularly influential in the development of this genre; his paintings were greatly praised and fetched high prices.

Notes

1. Bredius 1886: 41–46.

Bibliography

- Houbraken 1753, 1: 228–230, 358.
Swillens 1946.
Bergström 1956: 220–224.
Bol 1969: 324–327.
Montias 1982.
Sullivan 1984: 51–56, 70–72, 97.

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Still Life with Dead Game

1661

Oil on canvas, 84.7 x 67.3 (33³/₈ x 26¹/₂)
Pepita Milmore Memorial Fund

Inscriptions

At lower right: *Güill.^{mo} van. Aelst. 1661.*

Technical Notes: The support, a fine-weight, plain-weave canvas that has been lined, has been trimmed slightly at the top and sides. A thin, smooth, brownish beige ground layer was applied overall. A slightly darker imprimatura lying under the dead game was employed as a mid-tone.

The image was constructed with various layers of opaque paint of thin to moderate consistency as well as with glazes. The overall condition of the painting is excellent, with losses confined to the edges and the hare's muzzle. Thin upper layers and glazes are moderately abraded, particularly in the pouch and strap, bas-relief shadows, and background, and often expose the ground. Abraded rooster and partridge feathers have been retouched. No conservation treatment has been carried out since acquisition.

Provenance: Dr. C. J. K. van Aalst, Huis-te-Hoevelaken, by 1939; (sale, Sotheby Mak van Waay, Amsterdam, 18 May 1981, no. 489); (Richard Green, London).

VAN AELST DEPICTS a number of dead animals hanging above and resting upon a stone ledge, on which also lies a blue and gold hunter's game pouch. The animals are painted very precisely, and most of them can be identified. The largest are a European hare (*Lepus europaeus*) and two roosters, one white and one dark. Hanging before the legs of the hare is a European partridge (*Perdix perdix*). Suspended in the upper left with two falconer's hoods are an adult kingfisher (*Alcedo atthis*) and a common wheatear (*Oenanthe oenanthe*). The third bird in this group, which is only partially visible, has not been precisely identified. These animals must have been killed by a falcon as no bullet wounds are visible.¹

The tightly cropped and carefully orchestrated composition is characteristic of Van Aelst's paintings from the 1650s and 1660s. Through his use of light, color, and texture, Van Aelst focuses our attention on the animals and game pouch. The dark background gives the scene a somber, almost brooding quality. The impact of the painting, however, comes from its extraordinary illusionism. Van Aelst care-